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Speaking of Books... Connecting with Faculty through a Campus Author Series

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Abstract

A faculty author speaker series is an effective way to build bridges between academic librarians and the teaching faculty, as well as raise the profile of the university library. To explore the challenges and rewards of hosting such a series, this article presents a history of the series "Speaking of Books... Conversations with Campus Authors" at the University of Maryland. It discusses the details of planning and executing author events, in the hope that others can use this information to host their own lecture series. Finally, it presents a few ideas for future directions of the faculty author series.

Introduction

Academic librarians are continually seeking new and effective ways to work more closely with teaching faculty. Despite our best efforts, there often remains a gap between the two. Many faculty members still see libraries primarily as "just" a collection of books, journals and databases, or as a service unit; even when academic librarians have faculty status, many teaching faculty members still view them as support staff, not as valued collaborators in the educational process.

Since 2005, librarians at the University of Maryland Libraries have been attempting not only to bridge this gap, but also to raise the profile of the campus libraries through a speaker series entitled "Speaking of Books... Conversations with Campus Authors." This series began with the initiative of a handful of librarians on the Humanities Team,¹ and to date has produced ten events with more than five hundred total attendees. More importantly, the series has allowed a group of librarians to work closely with individual faculty members to provide a forum for great scholarship on campus and to foster the image of the UM Libraries as a place where teaching and learning take place every day.

To explore the challenges and rewards of hosting an author lecture series, this article will begin with a brief history of the “Speaking of Books” series at the University of Maryland. It will then discuss some of the details of planning and executing author events, in the hopes that others can use this information as a primer for how to host their own lecture series. Finally, it will present a few ideas for future directions of such a series.

Review of the Literature

While the “book talk” is a perennial favorite subject for public librarians, there is almost nothing published on the author talk in the academic library as a method of connecting with faculty. Carole Ann Fabian (2003) and her co-authors discuss author events as one of “Multiple Models for Library Outreach Initiatives” but acknowledge that “academic libraries have been slow to realize the potential of book talks as a tool for outreach, marketing, and collaboration.”² In her article on “Planning and Executing an Annual Library Lecture,” Irene M. H. Herold (2006) writes:

Providing a scholarly lecture series enhances the library’s reputation as a partner in support of the classroom curriculum. Our experience with the Mason Library Annual Lecture is that the library is now placed squarely in the heart of the learning environment and perceived as an active contributor to the intellectual life of the campus....³

The aims of the University of Maryland’s speaker series are similar to those of Herold’s—raising the Libraries’ academic profile, creating positive publicity, and providing a beneficial program to the community at large—but it has one important difference. While Herold’s annual library lecture features high-profile speakers from *outside* the university, the primary purpose of our series is for librarians to work closely with teaching faculty *within* the university, building relationships by offering them a campus forum in which to present their research.

Speaking of Beginnings... A History of the Author Series at the University of Maryland

The “Speaking of Books” series began informally in the fall semester of 2005, when the Libraries’ Humanities Team invited Dr. Vincent Carretta, a professor from the Department of English, to speak about *Equiano, The African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*. The book was relatively controversial in academic circles and was garnering a great deal of publicity. The author was engaged to speak about it elsewhere, so the team expected that he might already have plans to discuss the book at his own university. The team was surprised to discover that he was not scheduled to speak on campus, and furthermore, that the campus seldom marked the publication of

books by its own faculty members with such events. It seemed like a perfect opportunity for librarians to create an event that would benefit the Libraries and the faculty member, as well as the academic department and the university as a whole. With some funding for refreshments from the Dean of Libraries and the able assistance of the Libraries' Communications Office, the Team produced a successful event with more than sixty attendees. The faculty member was pleased with the audience turnout, book sales, and especially with the resultant write-up in the Friends of the Libraries' fundraising publication, *Illumination*.⁴ The event was so well-received that the Humanities Team followed up with a second talk the following semester, featuring English professor Dr. Verlyn Flieger discussing her book *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien's Mythology*. When the attendance and resultant publicity were similarly positive, the team decided that something more formal was in order.

Becoming Official

To continue developing the author series, the librarians needed to transform it from a "Humanities Team project" into a "University Libraries project." To this end the team wrote a simultaneous proposal to the library administration and to the College of Arts and Humanities, asking both units to co-sponsor the series. The proposal outlined goals for the series and its potential benefits for all parties involved. It emphasized the lack of any such forum on campus and the evident demand for such events, as shown by the good attendance and strong student and faculty interest in the first two talks. It also laid out, specifically, the areas in which the team would need assistance, provided an estimated budget, and detailed the tasks that the team would continue to perform. The requests were modest—\$100 per event from the College of Arts and Humanities to cover refreshments, and in-kind assistance from the Libraries' Communications Office with publicity efforts—but investment in the series by both units was important for its success.

Once the proposal was approved for the 2006-2007 academic year the real work began. The first priority was to find a catchy, memorable title that would help advertise the entire series, rather than individual events. One of the team members came up with "Speaking of Books..." to which was added the explanatory subtitle "Conversations with Campus Authors." Team members built a Web page for the series,⁵ and met with the Libraries' Communications Coordinator to formulate a comprehensive publicity plan. In all the team staged four events (two per semester) in 2006-2007, featuring faculty members from the departments of Communication, History, and American Studies.⁶

With the exception of one event, which had to be rescheduled due to inclement weather, the lectures were all successful. There were great turnouts of students and

faculty, engaged audiences, and satisfied presenters. In one case a professor brought her entire class to the talk, resulting in stimulating discussion between the students and presenter. In addition, with each event the team honed its planning and publicity skills, identifying “best practices” for hosting and advertising an event on campus. To document these lessons, the team undertook the creation of an “Author Series Planning Manual,” so that others in the Libraries could continue the series even if not a single member of the Humanities Team were able to participate. All along the team also heavily promoted the series within the Libraries, writing articles for library and consortium newsletters, cross-promoting with the Staff Learning and Development office, posting flyers in the libraries and sending broadcast emails to help build awareness of the series among the Libraries’ staff. The idea was to allow the Libraries as a whole to take ownership of the series, and for the entire staff to become invested in its continued success.

Building on Success

With four more successful events and the continuing support of the library administration, the librarians formed an interdisciplinary group to plan events for the 2007-2008 academic year. Again, the idea was to shift primary responsibility for the series away from one team and to distribute it more widely within the Libraries. With the inclusion of librarians from the Social Sciences Team, Art Library and Chemistry Library, participation in the series was opened up to faculty from campus departments other than Arts and Humanities.⁷ In 2007-2008 the series again featured four speakers, this time from History, Journalism, Government and Politics, and English.⁸ Planning is under way for another suite of “Speaking of Books...” events in 2009.

Starting Your Own Author Series

From the experience this author has gained by helping to plan and execute the “Speaking of Books” series, here are two general pieces of advice for starting a faculty author series at your library:

Start Small. It is probably unrealistic to plan a cocktail reception for 500 with a Pulitzer Prize winner as your first event. By starting with one or two small events you can gauge the interest of your campus community, learn the ropes of hosting events at your institution, and generally avoid getting in over your head. Starting small also means you should have less trouble convincing your library’s administration to support the series; the initial financial layout will be less and, if you eventually ask for more funding, you will have a handful of successful events to help build your case.

Have a Plan. Think seriously about the primary goal of an author series at your institution. For example, is it an educational program for students? Is it a public

relations exercise to court donors? Is it a way to establish stronger ties with individual faculty members? Some combination or none of the above? Answer this question realistically, and make all other decisions along the way with your primary goal in mind. For example: Is the goal to showcase the library's unique collections? In that case, choose authors who have made extensive use of the library, and ask them to include something about their research process in their remarks.

What follows are a few basic tips for planning and carrying out a successful author event, based on the author's experiences with the "Speaking of Books" series.

Finding Authors

Choosing a speaker with an interesting book to discuss is the single most important step to a successful author event. Consideration of the book should come first, since it is the topic, rather than the speaker, that will most likely draw the majority of attendees. The speaker is not unimportant, of course—even the best topic can be a disaster in the hands of an inept presenter—so try to get some intelligence on the speaker, especially if you are trying to decide between speakers with equally appealing books. Online course evaluations (through your institution or through sites like RateMyProfessors.com) may provide some clues, or you can ask colleagues and student employees for feedback.

When selecting a book, look for publications that could interest a wide range of potential attendees. The esoteric nature of most academic publications may make this a difficult task, but if you think creatively you should find plenty of suitable options. For example, despite its highly specific title, the team chose the book *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* for a spring 2007 event because it touched on a number of interesting issues—history, women's studies, family and social issues, and public health. This range of topics meant that the team could promote the event across a diverse array of academic departments and campus interest groups. Likewise, *The Primetime Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism* was chosen because the book, which examines the creation of American cultural identity on the popular television show *The West Wing*, had the potential to bring in students and faculty interested in government and politics, rhetoric, cultural and media studies and women's studies. As it turned out, it also attracted fans of the television show who were happy to see their favorite pastime treated seriously by college professors.

All of the faculty members have been delighted to be asked to speak at this type of event. An author series represents a new forum for their research, a learning opportunity for their students, a contribution to the intellectual life of the campus, and an "Invited Talk" line on their curriculum vitae. (The opportunity to sell a few books

doesn't hurt, either.) As "Speaking of Books" has grown, the organizers have received inquiries from several faculty members interested in being a part of the series, a sure sign that the Libraries are providing a valuable service.

Budget

With some creativity, the lack of a budget need not be an impediment to the creation of an author series. In the case of "Speaking of Books," the amount of money requested from the Libraries and the College of Arts and Humanities was small, but sufficient because other resources were available. The Libraries had a suitable venue which could be used free of charge, and a Graphics Coordinator on staff to help with posters. The team members used Microsoft Publisher and their own color printers to make flyers, and created a "Speaking of Books" page on the Libraries' Web site with no fuss and at no cost. Even food can be arranged for minimal expense.

Location

You may need to adjust your event to fit your available space; if you have only small conference rooms, consider a more intimate Q&A or lunch-time ("brown bag") session with your author, with scaled-down publicity to match. The quality of the presentation and the interaction between presenter and audience, not the size of the crowd, are what matter most.

Luckily, the UM Libraries has a beautiful "Special Events Room" which serves perfectly for these types of events. Large, but not cavernous or impersonal, the room seats approximately 125, can be laid out in a variety of arrangements, and has the necessary technology for audiovisual presentations. Although there are larger rooms available on campus, holding the events *in* the library was very important to the conception of the series. To build a perception of the library as a place of learning—a place not just about book stacks and computer labs but about the give and take of ideas that constitutes a true education—it was important to have these conversations *inside* the library. This has the added benefit of bringing students and faculty to us, where they might have occasion to use other services and collections (e.g., "Hey, I didn't know you had government documents!")

Publicity

Once you have an appealing speaker and a suitable location, you need to get the word out. The options available to you will vary based on the size of your institution, but here are a few ideas:

- **Create a recognizable brand.** Pick a memorable name for your series and create colorful, eye-catching flyers featuring an image of the book cover or a photo of the author to display around the library and around campus. Most publishers will happily send you a high-quality color image of the book cover to help advertise your event (and, simultaneously, their book). Flyers can be turned into posters which, in addition to helping with publicity, make nice gifts for the speakers after their events. Using the same color scheme or logo for all of your events will help you create a recognizable brand to bring in “repeat business.”

- **Look for existing campus publicity outlets.** Is there a campus-wide calendar of events? A weekly listing of activities in the student newspaper or faculty newsletter? A library newsletter to which you can add a short article about the talk? A campus radio or television station that features announcements from university offices? Blanket as many of these outlets as you can find to reach your potential audience.

- **Make personal connections.** Everyone knows that a generic email announcement from a faceless organization is much more likely to be ignored than a personalized message from a friend or colleague, so take advantage of personal connections wherever possible. Ask your speaker to invite her colleagues and students. Ask subject librarians to share the announcement with faculty in their departments; ask other library employees to share it with friends and co-workers.

The “Speaking of Books” team used the online class schedule to identify courses related to each speaker’s topic and sent short, personalized messages to the course professors informing them of the event and asking them to invite their students. Team members also emailed the leaders of relevant student groups, asking them to share the announcement with their members. Both tactics were met with positive responses; students and faculty were happy to know about the events and happy to share the information with people they knew.

- **Look for opportunities to collaborate.** A natural partner is your library’s development office, which can use an author event to help promote the library to potential donors and, in the process, provide you with additional publicity. The UM Libraries’ Director of Development has been a great supporter of the series, featuring it prominently in the Libraries’ fund-raising publication *Illumination*, demonstrating the perceived value of the series to the University Libraries.

Partners can be found in unexpected places as well. The team connected with the publicity coordinator for the Student Union, for example, who helped get the word out to student groups and campus publications. He also allowed the Libraries to post flyers and posters in the Student Union in exchange for a display space in the library for the Union to publicize its own activities. Even the campus Department of

Transportation Services has a program that allows campus units to advertise their programs free of charge on university shuttle buses. By submitting a simple form, DOTS posted fifty copies of a flyer in the dozens of shuttles that operate on and around campus, exposing events to hundreds of student and faculty riders each day.

- **Think outside of campus.** Identify local publications, such as community newspapers and free weeklies, to which you can contribute event information. Even large daily newspapers sometimes have free spaces for arts and cultural events. The major local newspaper, the Washington Post, for example, has a Sunday section called “Book World” that features author appearances around the area. Local organizations can be a great outlet as well. For a book on blues musicians and oral history, the team contacted the local blues society, which was more than happy to give us a full page in their newsletter (including a photo) for an article about the author and his book. You can also post flyers in local grocery stores, community centers, and public libraries to reach members of the general public who might not otherwise venture onto campus regularly.

Food

Adding “Refreshments will be served” to your advertising is always a good way to bring in the college student crowd. Again, this can be done simply and cheaply by making use of available resources. If you have a sufficient budget, use a campus or local caterer and let them worry about the details. If you do not have a budget, the local grocery store is an economical choice. With a little planning the team was able to purchase food and beverages for an audience of seventy-five for around fifty dollars.

Books

The team partnered with the campus bookstore to sell signing copies of the authors’ books at events, and found the book store more than willing to help. They sent a staff member to collect money and process credit card, and even helped with publicity by creating in-store displays featuring the books and event posters. If your campus bookstore cannot participate, check with other local bookstores. Even if they are not willing to send a staff member with stack of books to sell, they may be able to create an in-store display and engage in some cross-promotion to your mutual benefit.

Speaking of the Future... What’s Next for the Author Series?

After three years and ten events, “Speaking of Books... Conversations with Campus Authors” is becoming well-established at the University of Maryland. It has expanded from an informal, one-time event for an English professor to a fixture of the Libraries’

events calendar featuring speakers from all across campus. The objective from this point will be to keep and, ideally, increase the audience for each event, while thinking about innovative ways for the Libraries to promote faculty research and offer new learning opportunities to students.

As with so many other library activities these days, evaluation is important for the continued health of the series. Since the third event the team has been collecting attendee feedback with a simple paper survey. These evaluations have proved invaluable for determining audience demographics and revealing the most effective publicity channels for reaching them. For example, surveys showed that email announcements to departments and individual professors were the most important methods for reaching attendees, so the team should continue its efforts in that area. Likewise, very few people attend because of event flyers posted in campus buildings, so the team can shift some of that effort toward more productive publicity channels.

Beyond simply honing publicity efforts, there are many other opportunities for the organizers to improve the “Speaking of Books” series and to raise its status on campus. Some possible ideas to explore are:

- **Seeking greater campus integration.** In recent years the University of Maryland has celebrated “Themed Semesters,” such as “A Semester on Comedy and Humor” (Fall 2007) and “A Semester on War and the Representation of War” (Fall 2008). Choosing faculty publications that can be connected to these themes would help integrate the author series into the intellectual life of the campus, and allow the Libraries to take advantage of expansive publicity efforts already under way. This type of integration can be sought in smaller ways as well; most campuses hold events in honor of Black History Month, for example, so by choosing an author with a related work you can easily make the library’s event a part of the campus celebration.

- **Seeking greater campus collaboration.** As mentioned, campus partners, such as the Student Union and the Department of Transportation Services, already assist in the promotion of author events. It would be great to go beyond simple promotion, however, to have a campus school or department co-sponsor an author event or series of events. This would be an excellent way to further imbed the series in the campus culture and to reach new attendees. For example, the Libraries could host a “green” author series by collaborating with departments such as Environmental Science, Public Health, Government and Politics, and Economics to present faculty speakers on various aspects of environmental sustainability. It is likely that student chapters of organizations such as the Sierra Club and Greenpeace would also gladly participate in such a series if invited.

- **Turn attendees into donors.** Since the audience for the series thus far has been primarily faculty and students, organizers have not collaborated significantly with either the University's Alumni Association or the Friends of the Libraries. If the series can continue to grow, however, it may be worthwhile to make a formal connection with one or both of these groups to help publicize the series beyond campus and, in turn, to encourage attendees to support the Libraries financially.

- **Author Series 2.0.** Currently, the technological content for "Speaking of Books..." is relatively low. There is a series Web page which provides images of the books, descriptions of the events, and links to a few resources such as catalog records, reviews, author interviews, and Amazon.com. Introducing technological innovations could be another great way to expand the scope and the audience for a speaker series.

At the University of Mississippi, for example, the Libraries developed a "Faculty Authors" website to promote both faculty research and library collections.⁹ The site includes profile pages for faculty members, with links to catalog records or electronic full-text for their books and articles. Faculty can edit their own profile pages, shifting some of the workload away from library staff.

At the University of Virginia, the Claude Moore Health Sciences Library sponsors a weekly "History of Health Sciences Lecture Series," which it also makes available as downloadable audio podcasts.¹⁰ Video podcasts of author events--perhaps supplemented by original author interviews--would be another great product to offer to users via the library Web site or, to reach even more viewers, through YouTube. These interactive technologies can allow users to participate virtually in the author series, even if they are unable or unwilling to attend a single event.

- **Broadening the scope of the series.** "Speaking of Books" has a nice ring to it, but not all faculty members publish their research in book form. The planning group has struggled, for example, to find a way to feature work by the university's scientists and engineers (who publish primarily in journals) or performing and creative arts faculty (who perform or exhibit, rather than publish). In the future the group should think creatively about ways to include work by these valued faculty members. Perhaps a temporary name change to "Speaking of Performance" or a series of smaller article discussions would allow the incorporation of scholarly activity from these disparate disciplines.

A faculty author series is an effective way to build bridges between academic librarians and teaching faculty, as well as raise the profile of the university library. With a modest amount of effort, a series like "Speaking of Books" can progress from a single event to a regular feature of campus life, with benefits for librarians, faculty and students alike.

Notes

1. Librarians at the University of Maryland are organized in subject teams under the Public Services Division. The Humanities Team includes six librarians—Patricia Herron, Eric Lindquist, Yelena Luckert, Alan Mattlage, Heleni Pedersoli, and the author—who provide reference, instruction, and collection development services for students and faculty from the College of Arts and Humanities.
2. Carole Ann Fabian, et al., “Multiple Models for Library Outreach Initiatives,” *The Reference Librarian* No. 82 (2003): 39-55.
3. Irene M.H. Herold, “Planning and Executing an Annual Library Lecture,” *Library Administration and Management* 20, no. 3 (Summer, 2006): 131-134.
4. Mary Dallao, “Olaudah Equiano: Vincent Carretta’s Groundbreaking Research,” *Illumination: Centuries of Knowledge at the University of Maryland Libraries* 1 (2006): 16-21.
5. University of Maryland Libraries. *Speaking of Books... Conversations with Campus Authors*. <http://www.lib.umd.edu/MCK/booktalks.html> (accessed September 18, 2008).
6. The 2006-2007 line-up included Dr. Jeffrey Herf (History), *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust*; Dr. Shawn Parry-Giles and Dr. Trevor Parry-Giles (Communication), *The Primetime Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism*; Dr. Clare Lyons (History), *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830*; and Dr. Psyche Williams-Forsen (American Studies), *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power*.
7. The “Speaking of Books” Planning Group consisted of Robert Garber and Lily Griner (Social Sciences Team), Thomas Harrod (Chemistry and Life Sciences Team), Joah Stahl (Art and Architecture Libraries), and three continuing members of the Humanities Team (Eric Lindquist, Alan Mattlage, and the author).
8. The 2007-2008 line-up included Dr. Robert Friedel (History), *A Culture of Improvement: Technology and the Western Millennium*; Gene Roberts (Journalism), *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*; Dr. Paul Herrnson (Government and Politics), *Voting Technology: The Not-So-Simple Act of Casting a Ballot*; and Dr. Barry Lee Pearson (English), *Jook Right On: Blues Stories and Blues Storytellers*.

9. "Website Recognizes Faculty Scholarship, Research," *Mississippi Libraries* 70, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 102.

<http://www.msstate.edu/web/employees/detail.php?id=77> (accessed September 3, 2008).

10. Claude Moore Health Sciences Library, University of Virginia. *History of the Health Sciences Lecture Series*.

<http://www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/internet/library/wdc-lib/historical/lectures.cfm> (accessed September 3, 2008).

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